TO DESIGN A UNITED METHODIST CONFIRMATION CURRICULUM INSPIRED AND INFORMED BY TRADITIONAL TONGAN CULTURE AND PRACTICES

A Practical Research Project

Presented to

the faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

by

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Abstract

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Tongans share a deep Wesleyan / Methodist heritage with the United Methodist Church of today. Although Tongans make up less than 1 percent of the denomination, I believe that as a Tongan Pastor serving in a predominantly white denomination, we as Tongan United Methodist have something to offer.

The purpose of this project was to address a need in the Tongan Churches who are part of the United Methodist system. Professions of faith are a result of confirmation courses that are offered in the local church. Most Tongan UMC churches do not offer confirmation classes, let alone record professions of faith. Culturally there is an expectation that the youth and young adults attend church. What we are finding is that this is not enough to retain the younger generations. Often times the Tongan Churches are losing young families because they simply do not understand what it means to be a United Methodist, let alone be a Christian.

I noticed that there has been a movement amongst younger Tongans. The nature of the movement is a deepened curiosity about the Tongan language and culture. The beautiful thing here is that the Tongan culture and tradition is intertwined with faith. So, to address this need, I thought it would be helpful to create a confirmation curriculum that would be inspired and informed by traditional Tongan culture and practices. This will address a practical need in the church to properly record professions of faith, which the UMC uses to give insight to growth and fruitfulness, but also allow the younger generations to experience the “why’s” to what we do in in the local Tongan churches.

Acknowledgments

Dedicated to God and Family

My Wife – ‘Anaseini Fatafehi Lafo’ou Piukala

To My Parents: Nofomuli He-Fonua and Greta Suzanne Irving Piukala

My Children: Sefita and Lisa Marie Tautua’a

Roserine Mitiola

Sione Jr

Ilaiakimi Jr

Victoria

Grandchildren

Ninarima Hau’alofa’ia ‘I Simana

Lusila Tava

I would also like to dedicate this project to

Tevita ‘Elia ‘Ofahulu and Lavinia Pinomi ‘Ofahulu

mo e ‘Api ko Peteli

‘Oku hounga ho’omou ‘ofa mo tauhi

‘ofa ke hoko ‘a e ngaue ni ko ha pulopula lelei ‘e ‘aonga ki he kau mui’aki

Pea ke langilangi’ia ‘e ‘Eiki

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As a Tongan American, serving in the United Methodist Church has been a challenging experience for me. As you may know, the United Methodist Church is 90 percent White. Yes, it is a global church, but the struggle has been that the Church is US-centric, and the challenge that I have found over the years is that the dominant culture treats or receives the ethnic cultures into its circles as welfare cases, refugees, or less than. When I received my first appointment almost 20 years ago, it was to a Tongan church. The District Superintendent at the time gave me these marching orders, “Timote, we need you to go in and see what is actually going on, we can’t trust anything they say, and also know they are a welfare church.”

The assumption was that the Tongan church was a church within a church, that the church had nothing to offer, and was draining the resources of the conference meant for “more vital congregations.” I have been asked over the years how I became a Christian. As innocent as this question seems, the reason behind this inquiry to most who ask the question tend to believe that most Tongans who come to America were converted to Methodism or had become “SAVED” when coming to the US.

This sounds harsh, but this has been my experience. Here is an example: As recent as this year’s annual conference, there was a group of Tongans that had received their Local Pastors License, and one of the comments was, “We have all these people, where is Moana?” Imagine that in 2025. I didn’t hear the comment directly, but I was beside myself when the monitors from our conference commission of religion and race addressed this in their monitoring report.

There is a lack of fundamental materials available for Tongan United Methodists to use to teach confirmation that are relatable to the Tongan culture and practices. I am going to design a United Methodist Confirmation curriculum inspired and informed by Traditional Tongan culture and practices.

“Talu e fononga mai hotau vaka mei he kamata.” “Our vessel has been on this journey since the beginning.” These are the words I have heard around my home growing up. My father was part of a crew captained by Captain Saia Mafi and commissioned by the Tongan Government to travel abroad to bring the ‘Niuvakai’, a commercial fishing vessel, and a ship that could be used to help travelers reach the outer Islands. ‘Niuvakai’ is made up of two words, Niu - which is Coconut and Vakai- which is to be able to see or overlook, so in essence ‘Niuvakai’ means a coconut perch of which one can overlook. This is a word that Tongans often use to refer to the pulpit, that it is a ‘Niuvakai’ a perch of which the person preaching can overlook the congregation. I thought this to be interesting as my father was commissioned to bring the ‘Niuvakai’ as his son I occupy the ‘Niuvakai’ as a United Methodist Clergy and now a District Superintendent able to overlook or see the denomination from a vantage point that has allowed me to realize that there is a significant disadvantage Tongans are facing as part of the United Methodist Church.

Back to these words, “Talu e fononga mai hotau vaka mei he kamata”, “Our vessel has been on this journey since the beginning.” This is in direct reference to Tongans being part of the United Methodist Church since its merger in 1968. When the ‘Niuvakai’ came to port in Hawaii in 1973 under the guidance of Captain Saia Mafi according to my father, Captain Saia Mafi gave my father his passport and told him to disembark, wished him luck and told him to find a life.

My Father took his passport, thanked the captain and entered a foreign land and started life in a disadvantage.

Not knowing any English or anyone, one could imagine what that must have felt like. Tonga is a small Island Kingdom located deep in the South Pacific. It is located one the day-side of the international dateline which supposedly suggests that Tonga sees the first light of every new day. Well, it was a new day at least for my father. Tonga is made up of 176 islands all together, situated into 3 main island groups. The main Island of Tongatapu is 26 square miles, or least that is what I was taught in school. I spent almost 10 years growing up in Tonga, but I will touch on that later.

My father said that he was scared, and Honolulu seemed so big to him coming from a small Island. The first thing that came to mind was to visit the churches in his mind this is where he would find the Tongans. According to Nalesoni Tupou Esquire, a longtime Tongan Lawyer and historian, educated in New Zealand and credentialed in Tonga sat me down and explained to me my Tongan lineage as it relates to Methodism. Nalesoni Tupou also happens to be my father's first cousin on his mother's side.

Nalesoni told me that my great grandfather Rev. Anitelu Funaki was one of the first Methodist ministers. This was intriguing to me because this made a tangible connection to my calling into ministry but also a lens or context if you will to engage the church from an ethnic standpoint. According to George E. Marcus in his memoir No. 42, titled "The Nobility and Chiefly Tradition in the Modern Kingdom of Tonga":

> Beginning in the seventeenth century and continuing through the eighteenth, Tongans were visited briefly by a succession of explorers, most notably Cook. At the end of the eighteenth century, a small band of artisan missionaries of the London Missionary Society attempted to establish themselves in Tonga. Their efforts ended in disaster when they were caught between warring factions among whom they were working. In 1826, a

> much better organized and funded missionary endeavor was established in Tonga by the Australian Wesleyans. The Wesleyans shrewdly backed the incumbents of the Tuʻi Kanokupolu kingship in their efforts to establish effective hegemony over competing chiefly factions. The Tuʻi Kanokupolu in turn aided the spread of Christianity and the establishment of local church organization. Conversions were from the top down; indigenous missionaries became the agents of the European missionaries stationed at various places throughout the islands. The spread of Christianity was consequently contingent upon the missionaries' alliance with the politically most powerful chiefs. Tāufaʻāhau, an early convert to Christianity, had by 1845 become the Tuʻi Kanokupolu, after enjoying a longstanding symbiotic relationship with the well-established Wesleyan organization.
>
> In 1875, Tāufaʻāhau, now King George Tupou I, proclaimed a constitution which inaugurated a parliamentary monarchy, climaxing a half-century of power consolidation within the traditional polity and of partnership with the Wesleyan mission. (1978, 8)

As a District Superintendent of the United Methodist Church, I currently serve churches of the North District of the Desert Southwest Annual Conference. My district includes all the churches of northern Arizona and southern Nevada. As I have visited the churches, I have felt that most people's conception of when I explain that I am from Tonga is taken in a way I find surprising. After I explain I am from Tonga it is followed by these inquiries. "Where is Tonga?" and "When did you get here?" but here is the question that takes the cake, "When did you become Methodist." I often take this opportunity to remind these inquiring minds that there were Methodists in Tonga 28 years before Methodism came to Arizona or Nevada according to Rev. Rachel Gilmore who is the conference guru on all things Methodist.

The reason why this project is important to me is because I feel that I am being called to such a time as this. I know that seems to come off as cliché but, I feel that this is part of why I have been called to ministry.

I was born in Honolulu Hawaii to a Tongan Father and an American Mother born in Brooklyn New York. It has been a struggle for me growing up as a "Hafekasi" or "Half-caste". I have often felt that I was not Tongan enough and on the other hand not White enough. I do not

remember Hawaii much, my mother told me that before I turned one, we moved from Hawaii to Southern California. It was around this time my Father was instrumental on the establishment of the early United Methodist Tongan fellowships, one beginning at Ontario First UMC just down the street from the old campus of the Claremont School of Theology.

It was around this time in Southern California that gangs were on the rise and being and only child with both parents working made me the poster child of the 80's latch-key kid. It was this fear of gang influence and lack of supervision for me that my parents decided that Tonga would be the best place for me. So, in 1987 there was an opportunity to do so, all unbeknownst to be of course. My parents had conspired to take me to Tonga. My Paternal grandmother died in November of 1987, and at my father's request, I would travel with him to the funeral. I was 11 years old. After the funeral was done, I woke up on a Saturday morning to find out that my father had travelled back to America that Friday evening, and there I was Tonga's newest resident. This was the beginning of my almost 10 year stay in Tonga. I stayed in Tonga, studied and graduated and finally travelled back to the United States in 1995. I would say that these were my formative years. I learned the language and the culture firsthand. This is part of the reason that I feel that I am being called to this work and this project is because I am one of the first persons from a multi-racial background to be born in the United States and be sent back to Tonga. I am the only Clergy in the entire United Methodist System that is half-white and Tongan to grow up in Tonga. I feel that I am uniquely the "Bridge", A person that understands both cultures that can bridge the disconnect between the Tongans and the mainline United Methodist denomination that is 90% white.

This project will be important to the vitality and survival of the Tongan Churches in the UMC. There has been a long debate on how to connect the 1st generation Tongans who have

strong ties to Tonga and the 2nd and 3rd generations who cannot even speak the language. What I have found in my own experience being a Pastor to Tongan congregations for almost 20 years and have also witnessed this in my own kids, is that they want to connect with the culture but have no understanding.

How does this relate to the Church? well Tonga's history is deeply rooted in the Methodist movement. Tongan Theology is built into the language, and I hope to explain that in some of the curriculum topics that I will be presenting.

I feel that my unique upbringing, calling and experience thus far in the church can offer a connection point between young Tongan United Methodist, who for the most part, only connection point to their Tongan culture is in the Local Church. The problem is, is that there are no materials that connect the Tongan Culture to the UMC. Tongans have a rich history and tradition in Methodism but here in the United States there are no materials that explain the Doctrines of the church in a way that helps the younger generations understand and appreciate their culture as it relates to the United Methodist Church.

What I have witnessed is that most young families only come to church because their parents who are 1st generation still attend but once they pass on they leave the church because they are not connected to being UMC, their only connection is their parents and once the parents pass on, they leave the church.

I hope that the curriculum that I will design will find its way into all the Tongan churches and start a culture of nurturing confirmands who will end up professing their faith. This is important because most Tongan Churches do not practice this, we find this information in the UM Data website.

This then relates to what I heard my father say, that we as Tongans have been here from the beginning, and if this is true, why are materials hard to come by? I have taken this as a personal goal to help develop culturally appropriate materials that provide insight and connection to the UMC, so that the younger generations can understand that our culture as Tongans is rooted in Christianity and the most common expression of this Christianity is found in its Methodist / Wesleyan roots.

There is a saying, a motto if you will, that is found on the Tongan Royal Coat of Arms. It is inscribed with the words, "Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga Ko Hoku Tofi'a": "God and Tonga are my Inheritance." Tonga is not a wealthy nation; it lacks valuable minerals such as oil and gold. It is a small country. There are two things that are afforded to all Tongans, that as a Tongan you will know God and you will also have hereditary land that you can always call home. Paula Onoafe Latu (2011, 70), in his master's thesis at Massey University, shares an excerpt from a speech given by King George Tupou I of a unified Tonga for his inauguration of the Tongan constitution in Vava'u in 1875: "As I have said before I will say again, 'Tonga is dedicated to God.'" At the time of the *Tauátaina* Emancipation in 1862, King George Tupou I proposed three different mottos, one of which was, "God and Tonga are my inheritance" (58). In this same speech he also referenced the prophet Hosea 4:6a: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (NRSV). It is from this theological lens that I approach this paper, that knowledge and understanding should be afforded to all persons. Especially when it pertains to the doctrines of the church. In scripture we find the value of diversity, The apostle Paul sets the tone in his letter to the Colossians 3:11, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all" (NRSV). Theologically, when I encounter this scripture, it means all are equal and all are one. The differences are named, so that

suggests to me that we all come to the table with our unique gifts and graces informed by culture but ultimately, we are one.

The apostle Paul also suggests that language is important in one of his letters to the Corinthians: “Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning” (1 Corinthians14:10, NIV). I believe that God has uniquely created all persons. Language, at least for me is the basis of faith. It is where we find understanding. There is a Tongan saying that says, “He ‘ikai lava fakamavahe ko e mei ho le’o”: “No one can separate you from your voice.” There is something theological here. That there is something intrinsic in each person endowed by God to be a point of connection. That connection comes through communication and communication is done through language. Isn’t this how we experience God, partly it is through scripture. As a seminarian, I know that even scripture is interpreted through the lens of language and culture. I think it is my duty as an ethnic clergy, Tongan if you will introduce the understanding of God as it relates to the Tongan context. The way in which I will attempt to do this in this in the following chapters is to take a systematic approach to the lack of Tongan materials available in the UMC. At least for the purpose and scope of this project I will only be looking at Confirmation. The reasoning behind this is because this is where I see the biggest gap in the Christian journey of young Tongans and the biggest opportunity to connect faith and culture. I will also attempt to explain why confirmation leads to professions of faith and how this data is interpreted by the larger United Methodist denomination and how it relates to vitality, also how this data is skewed because of the lack of materials.

I may not be able to complete an entire curriculum although my hope is to do so. I would like to focus on three key doctrinal points that can be part of a confirmation curriculum that can

be explained in a way that brings connection to the church and societal Tongan living by introducing these concepts through a cultural lens.

The dilemma that I find with this project, is that no one has done this work primarily focused on creating a confirmation curriculum. This is what I see as the limitations of this project. However, I will look at connection point between the Tongan Culture and Methodism. The Method of which I would use for this project is to develop parts of a confirmation curriculum and offer it to a small group in a local Tongan UMC in the Las Vegas area. My goal is to see how my explanation of the church doctrines through a cultural lens can connect potential confirmands primarily between 8th graders to high schoolers to their Tongan heritage and also if they can make the connection of why we do the things that we do in church. In the following chapters beginning in chapter 1, I will give a brief history of Tonga as a country and its connection to Christianity expressed in Methodism and why I feel that I have the voice that can speak to this connection.

In the second chapter I will attempt to address why the current materials that are available are inadequate, and how professions of faith are currently not practiced equally in Tongan ministerial contexts. That the current confirmation curriculum does not offer a connection to the Tongan culture and religious practices. This is primarily important because the UMC gathers data around professions of faith and in turn interprets this material to determine vitality in the local churches.

In Chapter 3 I would like to address the problems due to lack of materials and questions around doctrine and how confirmation is the first step to the Christian Journey as a United Methodist. Also, how this confirmation curriculum will address the disconnect between the 1st

generations and the 2nd generations and why we are losing young families in the Tongan churches.

In Chapter 4 I would like to present parts of a confirmation curriculum and how it will inform Tongan confirmands of the connection between the UMC and Tonga's rich Wesleyan / Methodist history embedded in the culture.

The final chapter will address colonization and how it dominates theological perspectives and how creating cultural material can be liberating to the Tongans while also reclaiming their identity in a predominantly white denomination.

"Talu e fononga mai hotau ki'i vaka mei he kamata." "Our vessel has been on this journey since the beginning," The words of my father have become louder and louder in my psyche. It has bothered my spirit. The hope of this project is to begin conversations about equity in the United Methodist Church. The main motivation is that the Tongans will not lose their culture. That as Tongan clergy navigating the world of the UMC, that we are faced with a disadvantage. That disadvantage is unlike any other culture. The reason for this is that there are not a group of unchurched Tongans. As I mentioned earlier, there are two things afforded to all Tongans. One is the knowledge or the ability to know God, the other is land. So, as a Tongan you already grow up in a faith tradition. There are no unchurched Tongans. So, from a Pastoral perspective the pool is small to grow Tongan churches. Tongan churches grow organically. The first generations bring the children; the children get married and stay in the church and they have children.

This has worked for the most part, but what we are finding now is that younger families and youth don't know what it means to be United Methodist. They only identify the things we do in church as cultural because as the center of the Tongan society you will find the church. The

dilemma is that the younger families see the things we do in church as old ways, that the church operates from a cultural standpoint that they don't realize is undergirded by a theological understanding and that understanding also undergirds the Tongan society. What I hope to do and my intentions are as you read through the next chapters you will begin to see how the Tongan culture is connected to faith and how it's important that the younger generations, primarily confirmands will understand that our Tongan culture is woven into our belief as Christians and our Christianity is expressed through Methodist practices. Also, that there is a need for curriculum to be created inspired by Tongan culture and practices. This will lead to begin the healing from the harms done by theological colonization.

Chapter 2

The Need

What is confirmation? According to an article written by Joe Lovino for UMC.org titled, “Beyond Baptism: What Confirmation Means to United Methodists,”

> Although confirmation is not a sacrament in The United Methodist Church, it is an important marker along our spiritual journeys. At baptism, we are initiated into the new covenant in Jesus Christ and membership in the Church, Christ's body in the world. For many, this happens when they are very young. We recognize children are members of their human families, but no one expects them to clean their rooms or empty the dishwasher until much later. In the same way, "baptized infants are members of the Church — the family of faith — but are not yet capable of sharing everything involved in membership," *By Water and the Spirit*, The United Methodist Church's official statement on baptism, teaches. Confirmation is an opportunity to respond to the grace of God available to us, as acknowledged in baptism, and to promise to live as a person of faith. "What God offers us must be accepted in repentance and faith," *This Is Your Baptismal Liturgy* states. "Confirmation and reaffirmation are our responses of commitment, profession of faith, and rededication. (Iovino 2023)

Confirmation to me is a response to the progression of grace, albeit the same grace but at a point where baptized individuals make a conscious decision to their belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There has been some scrutiny that I have experience first-hand while leading a Tongan congregation from other Tongan congregations of other denominations. The scrutiny comes from the idea that we baptize infant children. Someone said to me, “Pastor, why do you baptize children? They do not know what is going on.” The thing is, I totally agree with this inquisition, and it also informs my understanding of grace as a United Methodist.

What I have found is that there is a gap in the faith Journey of Tongans in the United States. This also may be the experience of Tongans in the diaspora, in a broader sense this may be a common experience of Pasifika individuals across the world, but for the purposes of this project I want to focus on the faith journey of Tongans in the United Methodist church. The

gap that I am referring to stems from a cultural perspective of faith. There is a uniqueness to Tongans and the Tongan culture. I mentioned earlier that the motto referenced or found on the Tongan Royal coat of arms reads: “Ko e ‘Otua mo Tonga ko hoku Tofi’a.”, “God and Tonga are my inheritance.” I remember taking a Tongan studies course with the late ‘Etimani Taufa, a teacher at Tonga High School. ‘Etimani explained that Tonga was unique in a sense that it had never been colonized or occupied by a foreign power. ‘Etimani shared this story with the class, that King Siaosi Tupou I, before he accepted Christianity, was known as Tāufa’āhau. (I can appreciate this because Tongan history is an oral tradition and this, like most of my references, were passed down to me firsthand.) Even before the missionaries set foot in Tonga, Tonga was governed by a complex societal structure. As the missionaries came to Tonga they encountered this complex societal structure. Not only this but the Tongans practiced a complex religion as well known as the “Lotu mu’a” “Old Religion”. The story goes that a recent Christian convert; Pita Vi was travelling with Tāufa’āhau. Tāufa’āhau and his entourage were traveling to the outer Island of Ha’ano. It was also believed that when Tāufa’āhau would sail he was followed by the god – Taufatahi, a god that took on the form of a great white shark. Tāufa’āhau challenged Pita Vi about five miles out from the Island they were travelling to, “Te mau li ko e ki tahi ke sivi’i ho’o lotu fo’ou, we will throw you into the ocean to see if your “New Religion” is true.” So Tāufa’āhau commanded his guards to throw Pita Vi into the ocean. “Tuku ki a Taufatahi ke ne fai e sivi, leave it to Taufatahi (the great white shark) to do the testing.” So, they threw Pita Vi into the ocean about five miles out.

A few hours later when Tāufa’āhau and his crew were resting on the beach; Pita Vi came ashore. It was this defining moment that Tāufa’āhau started to convert to Christianity. It wasn’t long after this that Tāufa’āhau was baptized and took the name George (Siaosi), and became

King George Tupou I. King George I, began to outlaw all practices of the old relgion that worshiped gods of the sky and the underworld and decided to give himself, his land and his people to God.

This is a story that lives in the hearts of most Tongans, it's called 'Tukufonua' or the giving of Land and people to God. 'Etimani Taufa, taught us that King George Tupou I grasped some soil in his hand and offered it to God saying, I offer my Land and People to God. This is known as the 1862 Code of Laws or the Emancipation proclamation that freed commoners from forced labor to the Chiefs, given land rights and laid the groundwork for integrating religious values into civil law. This is where we get the motto: "Ko e 'Otua mo Tonga Ko Hoku Tofi'a, God and Tonga are my inheritance." To me, this is an understanding that all Tongans are afforded two things in life. The knowledge of God and Hereditary land that is passed down from generation to generation so that all Tongans, regardless of where they will have a place to call home.

This understanding I feel, has led to the gap in the Tongans' faith journey in the United Methodist church. As a Tongan I was brought up in church, my parents forced me to go. Church was a part of life. Tongan society revolves around Christian values. This influence was partly introduced into the Tongan culture by Christian missionaries, leaving a conflict of inculturation versus acculturation, which I will address in chapter three when I address the problems that Tongans face due to a lack of materials.

Church life seems to be synonymous with being Tongan. Tongans are unique in a sense that there are not a group of un-churched Tongans. 'Tukufonua' and its place in the Tongan society has afforded all Tongans a faith tradition. If you are Tongan, you are part of a faith tradition. The questions is whether you engage and participate in a faith-based lifestyle is your

choice. This poses a dilemma as a Tongan clergy. What I have found serving Tongan churches and congregations for the past 20 years is that we have taken for granted the notion that all Tongans are churched people. This has caused us to become complacent in teaching the people what it means to be Methodist and more so in the United States what it means to be United Methodist.

The complacency comes from the perspective that because all Tongans grow up in church and the fact that they are part of the church you serve is enough to keep them in church. This perspective works in Tonga because in Tonga the church is still the center of societal living. The church is still the hub of daily life. Here in the United States, the church is no longer the center of most people's lives, the church has become a thing to do if time permits, almost an afterthought if you will.

The issue is that I have found firsthand that retention in the Tongan UMC churches have recently become an issue because the younger generation do not connect with Tonga as a country because they have grown up in America. The only exposure they have to the Tongan culture is through church, but this is not enough. I asked my daughter the other day, "Why do you go to Church?" She told me, "Because you make me.", I asked several youths in my church the same thing and the answer was always the same, "My parents force me to come." Most young couples I have spoken with tell me the reason they come to church is because they want to honor their parents, this is a big thing in the Tongan culture. The Tongan culture tends to shun you if you do not honor your parents. So, they often attend because they want to avoid this stigma.

In the gospel of Jesus Christ according to John, Jesus questions Peter and says, "'Simon son of John, do you love me?'" After Peter responds, Jesus says, "'Feed my sheep'" (John 21:17, NIV). As pastors we have an obligation to feed the congregation. There is a Tongan saying that

says, “Ai ha maka he kete. Put rocks in your side.” This metaphor implies that as a Tongan one is toughened in faith. That intrinsically as a Tongan you have a resilient faith. This notion is tied directly to a cultural understanding. We live in a time where we are on the cusp of a transition from the 1st generation Tongans in the church to mostly 2nd generation families. Even more so, blended families, Tongans who have married outside the culture.

This has caused a gap, culturally and theologically. Most young families, the 40-25-year range find themselves questioning their faith. These are persons who want to connect to the Tongan culture but are heavily influenced by the dominate American culture.

I feel that God has called me for a time like this, because I can address this dilemma from a few perspectives that I feel are valuable to the issues at hand. I am half white and Tongan. There was a point in my life where I was ashamed to be a half-caste. Actually, I prefer to be referred to as multi-cultural. Growing up I would often be asked, “Are you Tongan or are you Palangi?” Palangi means white. It was an instigation to put down one culture and lift up another. The answer growing up was always Tongan. Maybe because it was the Tongans that were asking the questions. Growing up I always felt less than, because I was not White enough or Tongan enough. One of my earliest memories was of my maternal grandmother who was white, scrubbing my elbows because they were too brown. Another memory was when my maternal grandfather passed away and all the grandchildren gathered at my grandmother’s house to see what ‘papa’ left us. Everyone got things like money and a moped, oh I loved that moped, for me, I was left with a box of tools because my maternal grandparents thought that as a little brown boy I would only work as a laborer. Yes, their hunch was correct, I am a laborer for Jesus. Being both Tongan and White I can offer a unique perspective on each culture as it relates to church work.

In 1986, I was sent to Tonga to live. My parents, out of their fear of me getting involved with gangs, decided it would be best to live out my youth in Tonga, away from the influences at the time. I ended up spending the next several years in Tonga and finally came home in 1995. It was during this time that I became very familiar with the Tongan language and the Tongan culture. This is another unique perspective I have is I am fluent in both cultures. I have been in ministry in the United Methodist church on record since 2006 when I became the associate pastor for Trinity UMC of Phoenix Arizona. I started out in 2004 as the Lay Leader for the Tongan congregation and in 2005 became the lay person assigned. I began work in ministry at 24. I can offer a unique perspective of what it's like to serve the church at a young age. This is a point of contention culturally because the Tongan culture is a hierarchical culture and being young is often associated with lack of spiritual maturity and discipline.

I am the first Tongan District Superintendent appointed in the Desert Southwest Annual conference of the United Methodist church, and only 1 of 5 in the history of the church. It is from this vantage point that I can offer my voice to help make the connection between the 1st generation Tongans and the following generations in the life of the church. This is why I feel that this project will help make the connection and I feel that what I offer can speak into this.

Chapter 3

Why the Current Materials Are Not Adequate

As a Tongan clergy that has only served Tongan churches, I have come to recognize a struggle. My struggle is that there is a lack of materials available that can speak into the Tongan culture. I want to make the distinction that it is not translated materials, materials can and have been translated into Tongan, the problem is that there is a lack of materials that offer a deeper connection culturally to those who will engage the material. In this case it is confirmation and the curriculum thereof.

I chose confirmation because this seems to be the weakest connection point that I see in the faith Journey of Tongans in the United Methodist Church. The reason why I believe this is because Tongan culture places in this journey the basic assumption that because you are Tongan your faith is intrinsically solidified. The journey of a United Methodist, I believe, travels alongside Wesley's understanding of Grace and who we are as Methodists. "Methodism is a story of God's love. We receive God's grace. God's grace is offered freely to all in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In the story of Methodism, grace is received and shared through practices of Christian faith and discipleship" (Warner 2024, 8). Laceye Warner mentions something critical here, and that is that grace is received and shared through Christian practice. The assumption that I see that has developed in the Tongan church is that because you are Tongan faith is part of the culture. This can and has held true for those who understand the Tongan culture, but what about the Tongans who attend the Tongan church, experience the culture only in the life of the church but do not understand why? How do you address the fact

that most of the younger families and generations who do not speak the language or have even set foot in Tonga.

Growing up in Tonga, I was able to experience the culture and how the culture was informed by the Wesleyan movement and missionaries. In recent times I have seen the commercialization of the Pasifika culture. In secular media, Pasifika persons are portrayed as strong and tough, often categorized as gentle giants. In both college football and the NFL we see collegiate athletes and professional athletes who are Tongan, gesture or signal with their hands the 'T' which shows the world that they represent Tonga. There are four pillars to Tongan society that uphold the culture, it is called the "Faa'i Kavei Koula" or "4 Golden pillars". These four things have a theological undergirding that most younger Tongans have no idea. I will explain the '4 Golden pillars of Tongan society' as part of the confirmation curriculum later in the paper. To gesture the 'T' also gestures that you are willing to apply these four pillars to your life as a Tongan. Being Tongan is much more than just a show of strength. It is the spiritual fortitude to contribute to community life.

This is where the connection is lost. Let us look at the Wesleyan / Methodist understanding of grace, which is found in its mission statement, which appears in *The Book of Discipline*, para. 120: "*The Mission*—The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs" (The United Methodist Church 2024).

There is a Tongan saying that says, "'Oku kamata 'a e me'a kotoa mei he punu nga,": "Everything starts from the nest." What this essentially means is that the journey always begins at home. This is why the mission statement of the UMC is meaningful because it names the

Local church, which for most Tongans is the beginning of the faith journey. It is also a cultural understanding that the local church is an extension of the home. Often you would hear in the local Tongan church something along these lines, “Kou ha’u mei fale ki fale”, “I am entering this place as if it were my home.” So, if the local church is the best arena to nurture this journey, then it is important that we pay attention.

> As compared to Luther and even Calvin, Wesley is rather explicit indistinguishing differing stages in the salvific process. Whereas the former, especially Luther, focus on the efficacy of grace in one primary locus such as justification or predestination, Wesley is more apt to describe the distributive effects of the one grace of Christ along the processive stages of Christian salvation. The Wesleyan division is primarily threefold: Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three – that of repentance, of faith and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, the religion itself. Each of these doctrines corresponds to a different mode of saving grace: prevenient, justifying and sanctifying. (Del Colle 2002, 172)

There is a Tongan proverb that says, “Hange ha folau ikai hano taumu’a,”: “Like a journey with no destination.” To me this speaks directly to why I chose confirmation as my project. Not having a confirmation curriculum informed by Tongan culture is like a journey without a destination. John Wesley introduces the progression of faith to salvation using grace as the vessel.

As a District Superintendent I have had the privilege to sit on District Committees. One of those committees is the district committee on ministry. Part of the process of becoming clergy in the United Methodist Church is recognizing a call. For Tongans the assumption is that all are called, that you are born into this call. It is not that you are special but because faith cannot be separated from the culture, that there is the assumption that you are in ministry. So, with this understanding it comes into direct conflict with the mainline UMC’s understanding of call. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2020/2024*, para. 304, speaks to the Ministry of the Ordained: “Those whom the Church ordains shall be conscious of God’s call to ordained

ministry, and their call shall be acknowledged and authenticated by the Church. God's call has many manifestations, and the Church cannot structure a single test of authenticity. Nevertheless, the experience of the Church and the needs of its ministry require certain qualities of faith, life, and practice from those who seek ordination as deacons and elders. In order that The United Methodist Church may be assured that those persons who present themselves as candidates for ordained ministry are truly called of God."

The posture of the UMC is to vet those who are called, and by doing so there is a process. Part of the process is being affirmed by the local church and from there being recommended to the district committee on ministry. When one is referred to the district committee on ministry as a candidate for ministry, the candidate must complete a psychological examination. This examination is counter cultural to the Tongan culture. Most of the questions that are presented in this evaluation prompt to the candidate to speak about themselves as if they 'Deserve' to be in ministry. One of the candidates that was coming through the process that was Tongan had a questionable psychological evaluation. According to the Psychologist that administered the test, this Tongan candidate should be referred to a mental health institute with the possibility of medication as a treatment.

The test showed that when questions about themselves came about, the candidate was unsure and indecisive. This was an indicator for depression or anxiety. So I wanted to test this theory, so I put the candidate on the spot and asked the candidate specifically to translate "I Deserve this", I could see that the candidate was struggling, it was after a long pause that the candidate responded by saying, "Kapau ko e finangalo 'o e 'Otua, If it is God's will."

Confirmation curriculum follows the journey of faith as it mirrors the Wesleyan / Methodist understanding of grace. It is this understanding of grace that leads to salvation. It is

important that we define grace. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV). In scripture this supports the Tongan understanding of grace, as the Tongan candidate struggled to translate “I deserve this” into Tongan, we can begin to see how theology and Christian values are built into the language.

“God offers grace to all. Grace is a free gift of God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (2024, para. 102), a description of grace precedes a discussion of the “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases”: “By Grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.” Prevenient grace, the grace that comes before. The understanding that God offers us a relationship with his son Jesus Christ even before we know who God is. The best example of prevenient grace is infant baptism, even-though the infant doesn’t realize what is happening in the moment, it is an expression of God’s love and grace, not contingent on understanding. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5, NIV). Confirmation for me, then takes the Journey at the appropriate time in a young disciple’s life and builds on the understanding of grace. This is where I have identified the lack of materials that speak to the Tongan culture. This is the moment when young disciples are nurtured in their faith. When the doctrines of the church are offered so that the confirmand can freely and willingly profess their faith. There is an existing confirmation curriculum offered and used widely in the United Methodist church with different themes and approaches but for the purposes of this paper is that the basis for the curriculum is to explain the doctrines of the methodist church in a way that relates to the Tongan culture. It is my understanding that a curriculum of this nature does not

exist. Confirmation is important because it brings the Journey to Justifying grace. “John Wesley provides further guidance for understanding grace in his sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” in which he categorizes grace as prevenient, justifying and sanctifying.” Baptism experienced in the United Methodist Church is a true example of prevenient grace, confirmation brings forth the Journey in understanding what was being offered at the moment of baptism which is a relationship with Jesus Christ. This point of realization brings an understanding of the grace of Justification. This is where confirmation works for the benefit of those who are on the journey.

The assumption is, when you are baptized in the church, Tongan culture says that you are not separate from the journey. Confirmation is overlooked, partly because questioning your faith is frowned upon, and when the younger generations face questions about their faith, they revert to, “I only come because my parents made me, or I don’t understand the Tongan culture.” This attitude leads to young families exiting the Church and not seeing the value of faith and culture and how the Methodist faith and Tongan culture is intertwined. It is the offering of right relationship that one realizes that Jesus died for their sins and it is in this mighty act in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are Justified. Once children are baptized in the Tongan church, the Tongan culture holds them in the fold, when I say fold, I mean the church.

What I have seen and witnessed in my own ministry is that Tongan Methodist come to a point when they stop coming to church because their parents have passed on and because they have not been taught the doctrines of the Methodist church they leave. This puts them at a disadvantage, because as they decide to leave the church, they do not realize that they are also forgoing a big part of their culture because Tongan culture was shaped from a Methodist lens.

In his thesis, Paula Onoafe Latu references Rev. Dr. Taliai Niumeitolu's doctoral research called "The State and the Church in Tonga" (2007), which "assessed the place of Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWC) in the faith life of the Tongan people. And based on his argument, Gittins' warning that 'what Christians sometimes celebrate as Christianity making headway in the local culture is not inculturation but mere acculturation'" (Latu 2011, 1).

Inculturation is "the process of a religion adapting its practices or structure to harmonize better [with], or be more relevant/resonant to a new culture," without losing its core identity (Munson 2025). *Acculturation*, however, as defined by Nicki Lisa Cole (2025), is "a process of cultural contact and exchange through which a person or group comes to adopt certain values and practices of a culture that is not originally their own, to a greater or lesser extent. The result is that the original culture of the person or group remains, but it is changed by this process." This is what I believe has happened in the United Methodist Church. That acculturation has been the receiving protocol of ethnic cultures into the mainline denomination. That the process of adopting traits or social patterns have been the burden of the ethnic church. That the mainline denomination has not made a conscious effort to understand how Pasifika persons experience the church. I believe it should be more of inculturation, where the dominant culture integrates itself into a specific cultural setting, adapting its ways to help inform, draw in and nurture those outside of the dominant culture.

I was sitting in a cabinet meeting and our director of new and vital faith; this is a conference committee that is particularly interested in tracking the growth of local churches in our conference. Part of the data that was referred to was professions of faith. The assumption was that the vitality of the Local Church was directly corelated to professions of faith. What I witnessed is that most Tongan churches did not enter or record any professions of faith over

many years, and some there was data that showed some Tongan churches had some professions of faith. If this data would be interpreted by what the data showed, it would suggest that most of the Tongan churches were declining. This was in direct contrast with the data recording membership, which showed numerical growth. Part of the reason for this, is that the Tongan church for the most part does not offer confirmation classes. I do not blame them because the assumption that is built into the culture is that if you are Tongan you have faith in Christ and you are not to question that faith, but what we have found is that the moment young person's / young families are faced with questions of their faith there is a disconnect that often leads to a separation from the church and the United Methodist denomination as a whole.

To understand more the importance of confirmation in the United Methodist church, to challenge the assumption that I made that confirmation wasn't important in the Tongan culture and it was at odds with the mainline United Methodist church I gleaned some insight from a United States ecumenical study of confirmation conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski titled "Keeping the Main Thing, the Main Thing":

> From 2014 to 2016, leaders from five denominations in the United States (US) studied the practices of confirmation in the US. The research was generously funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. To our knowledge, this is one of the few empirically based studies on confirmation conducted in recent decades, if not the only one. The project included the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Episcopal Church in the United States (ECUSA), and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). Each of these Protestant traditions practices confirmation in some form, which also indicates that they practice infant baptism. Four of the denominations are historically Euro-American, while one is historically African-American. Although these five denominations are not representative of all denominations in the United States of America practicing confirmation, they do reflect several core traditions. Our study revealed various insights into what was happening in the 2010s in relation to confirmation and suggested possible ways forward. (Mikoski 2025, 1)

Part of what they found in this study was that the primary motivation for this was ‘fun’. This concept does not translate culturally for Tongans, I think because the approach to church in general especially Jesus is rooted in deep respect. To see this as fun would suggest a lack of respect. Ther were also areas that and topics that they found to be important:

There was comparatively less interest in topics like miracles or church leadership. Specifically, young people identified their top four areas of interest as the Bible (its nature and how to read it), the specifically Christian nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Parents of confirmands expressed a desire for their children to learn about the Lord’s Supper, the Bible, the Trinity, and the meaning of baptism.

Confirmation leaders shared similar priorities with parents, highlighting baptism, the Bible, Holy Communion, and God as Trinity. Interestingly, confirmands showed a greater interest in learning about the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments than the sacraments. Conversely, among parents, leaders, and confirmands across the five denominations, the topics of least interest for confirmation were abortion, gay marriage, drug abuse, and church governance. No one we surveyed was particularly interested in including these ‘hot topics’ as core elements of the confirmation curriculum. Our findings suggest that for confirmation, all parties are focused on the heart of Christian belief and practice. In other words, Americans involved in confirmation within Protestant churches are keen to ‘keep the main thing the main thing.’

What this study suggests is that there is a yearning for confirmation material to explain doctrines for the United Methodist Church. I would suggest the following: Wesley’s

quadrilateral, The Trinity, Jesus is Lord and the four golden pillars of Tongan Society to speak to what it means to live in community.

Chapter 4

The Curriculum

Tongans share a deep Wesleyan / Methodist history. I often remind the churches that I visit during the year that there were Methodists in Tonga 28 years before Methodism came to Arizona or Nevada. The states in which I serve. For many years, our culture has been treated as a spectacle, a side show if you will. I refer to this as tourist mentality, there is an expectation that our culture is like the show at a Luau, that as the dominant culture relaxes and eats, we share our songs, dance, and culture to make their eating experience enjoyable. We are not the half-time show, I have always believed that the Tongan culture has so much to offer the denomination, and it is rooted in the culture.

This is why I chose my DMin project to be the creation of a Confirmation curriculum that is designed and informed by Tongan religious and spiritual practices. It is creating resources and materials that can be used across the denomination that will give some insight to what Tongans can share in faith and in spirit that will help all persons. As part of this section, I will attempt to introduce you to three main things. The first being the mission of the church and how as a Tongan I going through confirmation should approach this, the second is the sacraments a tangible connection between humanity and God as explained from a cultural lens and then the final part the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, lens in which can be used and explained from a cultural standpoint that will help confirmands begin to understand scripture and God. However, I will also try and offer a cultural perspective explaining the different components which I have chosen in this section to give you some insight on how I feel culture can add to the denomination as a whole. This leads me to the mission and mission setting of the United Methodist Church.

Paragraph 120 in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2020/2024* reads, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs.” The first place in living out the Church’s mission is at ground zero, which is the local Church. I believe that in order to make disciples one must first be one. Jesus in scripture gives us this example: “You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (John 13:13-17, NRSV). Tonga is a country that is governed by a Constitutional Monarchy, it has never been colonized or occupied by a foreign country.

Tonga is also known throughout Oceania as the “Friendly Islands” coined by Captain James Cook. Although Tonga is located deep in the South Pacific, there has always been a yearning call to service in the world. Below is an example of a Tongan hymn; it speaks to the question, “Who is our neighbor?” Tongans have a saying that says, “Ko ho’o kaveinga, ko hoku kavenga” (Your burden is my burden). So, the perspective is not that we are providing or serving others out of pity or the sense of welfare but in a sense that lets us carry this burden together. A Tongan hymn found in the *Ko e Tohi himi ‘a e Siasi Uesiliana Tau‘ataina ‘o Tonga* ((America 1910)), number 423, reads as follows:

> FANONGO ki he tangi 'A si'i Initia, / **Listen to the cries of our brothers in India.**
> Mo Siaina tokolahi, / **And many in Asia**
> Kae fonu mala'ia. Fanongo e, fanongo, / **Listen, listen to the cries**
> He kole 'oku fai Ki Tonga monu'ia, / **They are calling for us in Tonga**
> "Kainga, 'ofa mai!" / **Please share your love**

2 Ko Afilika ena, / **There is Africa**
Mo hono fu'u kakai; Tutu 'a e ngahi kolo / **With all our brothers, their homes have been burnt** Mo taki popula'i. Fanongo e, fanongo, / **they have been taken away in bondage, listen, listen to the cries**
He kole 'oku fai Ki Tonga monu'ia, / **They are calling for us in Tonga**
"Kainga, 'ofa mai!" / **Please share your love**
3 Ko 'Otu Solomone / **The Solomon Isles**
Masiva he lelei: Ko Siava mo Neu Kini, / **Java and New Guinea**
Mongoli mo Malei. Fanongo e, fanongo, / **Mongolia and Malaysia, Listen, listen to the cries**
He kole 'oku fai Ki Tonga monu'ia, / **They are calling for us in Tonga**
" Kainga, 'ofa mai! " / **Please share your love**
4 Pea te tau tofanga / **Here we are in Tonga**
'I ha lelei pehe, Kae tuku ta'etokanga / **Blessed by knowing God**
He kainga 'oku he? 'Oku tau ma'u ha maama; / **Shall we not share that understanding**
'Oku tau ma'u 'Otua; Kae mate kinautolu / **Of God's grace and love?**
5. Te tau fehulunaki? **/ Shall we act like we don't notice?**
Te tau nonofo noa? / **Shall we do nothing?**
Mo fakaongotuli?/ **turn a deaf ear?**
He'enau fakafoa? 'Oku tau kaunga toto, / **To their cries, we are one blood**
'Oku tau kaunga hia, Mo kaunga 'amanaki, / **we all are sinners / but we are one in hope**
Mo kaunga mala'ia, / **and receivers of grace**
6. Tau 'oho 'o hamusi, / **Let us pull them out**
Tau li ha maea e: / **Give them a rope**
Foaki 'etau pa'anga, / **Let's give our money**
Mo toutou lotu pe. / **Let's send our prayers**
Na'a hoko mai he 'aho, / **Before that day comes,**
He 'aho he 'Otua, 'O 'eke 'e he 'Eiki, / **The day of the Lord, and he questions us,**
'Koma'a ho tokoua?" / "**Where art thou, my siblings?"** (Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga 1981)

This hymn touches my soul; it fills it with Love for my neighbor. The words of this hymn challenge me to live out that which I am called. This is particularly important as a perspective for Tongan confirmands because it sets the perspective that call transcends culture. This hymn starts to form the lens of which I will see the world and approach my ministry. In the Tongan culture, there is a saying, "Tau keinanga fakataha." "Let us eat together." It is a common invitation that is rooted in connection. I would offer a glimpse into the "means of grace" as coined by John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism; in Tongan, we say, "Ma'unga Kelesi," which

translates to “means of grace,” but in a deeper sense, “Ma’unga” doesn’t just mean “means,” it is an action word that also means to “grasp on to or reach out to.”

It is with this perspective in mind that culturally the Eucharist or Holy Communion from a Tongan perspective is an invitation to “let us eat together.” It is an invitation to let us break bread together. Now this is not a new concept, but rooted in Christ’s offering to us, but from a Tongan perspective, the invitation to eat is not like a Westernized understanding if I were to invite you to a meal. If I were to invite you to a meal, I would usually ask what you would like or what your favorite food is. From a Tongan perspective, the invitation is to receive what I have prepared; it is a very vulnerable posture, because usually what is being prepared is all that was available. It invites you in to see the “true me,” the meal that I have prepared for my family, not a dressed-up occasion but one that invites you to come as you are. Isn’t that the heart Christ offers himself to us?

Tonga is also a hierarchical society. Before the missionaries set foot in Tonga, Tongan society was highly structured and operated under a class system. So often you would find that royalty would not sit at functions together with commoners; that is one thing that is special to Holy communion, that all are welcome.

“There are two Sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord” (The United Methodist Church 2024, para. 103, art. 16). These are the only two sacraments observed by the United Methodist church. The significance of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism is that they were ordained by God.

John Wesley (1999), in his sermon number 16 titled “Means of Grace,” explains, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying,

or sanctifying grace." The Sacraments are part of what John Wesley considers to be "Means of Grace," a way in which we encounter God and experience God's grace. As it pertains to Ministry, "Sacraments ordained of Christ are not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they are certain signs of grace and God's good will towards us, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm, our faith in him" (The United Methodist Church 2024, para. 103, art. 16). One of the primary roles of Sacraments is to strengthen and confirm our faith in Christ. This is especially important in all congregations and ministries, but the Lord's Supper is a way Tongans connect to Christ. In the United Methodist Church, all are welcome at the table of the Lord. Food is a staple in the Tongan culture, and feasts are common practice. Culturally, only the prominent in society will be invited to the table at a feast.

When an invitation is sent out to the congregation from the pulpit, there is this connection of worth and belonging that cannot be taught or read in a book; it is the experience that God calls all, and that status does not matter. As I form the lens of how I will deal with challenges in the church. I am called to this understanding, and then it poses a critical question for me. "If status doesn't matter, why are people being treated like 'less than' in and outside the church?"

In the first part of the section, I wanted to address call: "Why and Whom are we called to serve?" My intention was to introduce a Tongan hymn and Holy Communion from a Tongan perspective to point out who I will be serving and why I will be serving. The answer is, All persons. I believe this to be an important perspective to include in the curriculum because it makes the connection to all persons, that young persons or young families who may not

understand the culture know that there is room for all. This is particularly important for multicultural persons like myself and also blended families.

The next portion of this section is to hopefully address the ‘How’ which I believe to be the heart of this project. As a District Superintendent I am faced with many challenges. There are situations that arise in the church that are very sensitive. It is in those times that I lean on my cultural competency but also on a tool called to Quadrilateral. It is a tool that was used by John Wesley, “I can’t say he came up with it.” But for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to it as Wesely’s Quadrilateral. It is a tool designed to gain a theological understanding of the ‘Will of God’ or an understanding of God.

It would be arrogant for one to say in my humble opinion that they fully understand God. How can we fully understand an infinite God with our finite mind, a discussion for another time. I believe that approaching any challenge in the church, in my case discrimination of ethnic clergy and persons in a predominantly white denomination. I have chosen for this paper to use Wesely’s Quadrilateral as the lens to approach different scenarios that I am faced with. However, I am going to explain the process of the Quadrilateral as it relates culturally to me. There is a unique way Tongans build homes or ‘Fale’. As I feel that ministry is also creating a ‘Fale’ here is my take.

In our pursuit to understand the things of God we have Scripture, tradition, experience and reason also known As Wesley’s Quadrilateral. Growing up in Tongan in Church it was explained to me in this way. “Folofola/Scripture, Tukufakaholo/ Tradition, A’usia/ Personal Experience and Losiki / Reason are the four post of the Tongan ‘Fale’ or House. The Traditional Tongan ‘Fale’ was made with four corner posts called ‘Pou Tuliki’; these posts carried the weight of the ‘Fata’ (which literally translates ‘to carry’) or the crossbeams that will in turn hold

the roof. The first and strongest post is called the ‘Pou Pule’ or Governing post. This is the first post that is secured, and from this, the rest of the house is measured. It is the strongest post of them all and is usually faced in the direction of the Tradewinds to withstand any storms.
The posts were secured deep in the ground, which in turn was the foundation. The foundation for the home or ‘Fale’ we build is Christ. This house is a house of Faith. Each post must be dug deep into the foundation of Christ to be secure to withstand the test of time. (My Sunday school teacher used the illustration of hurricanes and stormy seas because this is what we were familiar with.) These tests could also be seen as pressure from a secular world.

The first post is Scripture, this is the ‘Pou Pule or Governing post.” United Methodists “share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine” (The United Methodist Church 2024, para. 105, sec. 4). I understand through scripture that Jesus was the ‘logos’ or word made flesh. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NRSV). The fifth Article of Faith of the Methodist Church states: “The Holy Scripture contained all things necessary for salvation.” I agree with this firmly, that scripture is a way to connect with God, it was recorded by men whom I believe, along with the United Methodist Church, to be illumined by the Holy Spirit. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV). I believe scripture in and of itself is complete and does not need an outside source to support it; tradition, experience, and reason help us to understand it more clearly for ourselves. The house of faith in this case stands in direct correlation to one another, finding its measurements from the first post in scripture.

The next is the post of tradition. I think of tradition, of things that are unique to my culture that help me connect and identify with who I am as a part of that culture. I agree with *The Book of Discipline* that "Christianity does not leap from New Testament times to the present" (The United Methodist Church 2024, para. 104). It is my understanding that many people before me sought to find meaning in scripture. Christian history leads us to believe that these traditions have been passed from generation to generation. A very lively concept in my mind, because tradition in my culture is passed on both oral and written. The post of tradition must line up and measure in conjunction with the post of scripture to carry the crossbeam for our house of faith.

The next is the post of experience / a'usia. "Our experience interacts with Scripture. We read scripture in light of the conditions and events that help shape who we are, and we interpret our experience in terms of Scripture. All religious experience affects human experience; all human experience affects our understanding of religious experience" (The United Methodist Church 2024, para. 104). This post is set in line with scripture and in conjunction with tradition. We experience things in life, and for us Christians, we filter these things through scripture in order to help us find meaning in what it is that we experience. We experience the love of Christ; we may not realize it like the two on the road to Emmaus, but we look back and find that our hearts were strangely warmed. I love the story of the walk to Emmaus because it illustrates for me what it is like to walk with Jesus. Just as the two disciples had witnessed and experienced something that I would consider lifechanging regarding the crucifixion of Jesus, they were confused and troubled. It is in these times when we are walking the closest with Jesus. Jesus then uses scripture to help explain the experience that they had encountered, but it wasn't until they broke bread and accepted the invitation from Christ that their eyes were opened to realize a new perspective. I believe that when we accept Christ on a personal level, we experience what *The*

Book of Discipline states as a "New life in Christ or Christian Experience" (The United Methodist Church 2024, para. 104). I believe that we are informed by our experience, but just as it is one of the posts of our house cannot stand alone, but in harmony with the other posts.

The last post to our house of faith is the post of Losiki or reason. I believe reason to be of God. It is the basis of Logic where we in Tongan get the word 'losiki'. Logic and reason are the basis for understanding. It is with reason that we complete the four posts of the house. It is ready now to carry the crossbeams. The crossbeams or 'fata' are considered to be the Holy Spirit that connects the four posts. The Holy Spirit works to connect our reason in interpreting and understanding scripture that informs our experience and is passed on through tradition or in any other way. The point is, is that the Holy Spirit is at work in connecting all four posts.

I have been challenged in my ministry in many ways. It is often difficult to gauge how I will respond to different scenarios that present themselves. When I was the Pastor of the Local church and only had to tend to one congregation, there were problems or challenges if you will that I often faced. Most of these situations dealt with challenges that affected daily living. What I mean by that is that being a Pastor or Leader of a local church, you find yourself faced with challenges that relate to the daily life of its parishioners. Most of the situations that I faced were ones that had to do with basic human needs. Shelter, food, clothes. On an emotional and spiritual level, some people needed love or just to be heard.

Here is a situation that I would like to address, and how I would use the Quadrilateral to help me pause and contemplate the situation before engaging.

I was asked recently why we perform infant baptisms in the United Methodist Church. This was a point of contention for the person asking me, almost accusatory in a way. "Why do you baptize babies when they do not hold the capacity to make a decision for themselves." I

could tell that this person was really agitated and felt that I was part of a conspiracy to convert children or make decisions for someone who did not have the capacity to choose for themselves.

I took a moment to look at the situation from the lens of Wesley's Quadrilateral. Also, my understanding of the Tongan 'Fale', because I was attempting to build a house that I could at least invite her in to see where I was coming from. I didn't want to use the Quadrilateral in a way to prove a point, but my Tongan cultural understanding of the Quadrilateral helps put into perspective for me that I am building a home and my intention from there would be invitational not confrontational. Just as I explained earlier using the example of Holy Communion, I would prepare my response in a way, not to be dressed up but I would invite this person in to partake in what I had prepared.

So, I looked at scripture, and what I found was Matthew 19:14 (NRSV), in which Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is too such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." It is in scripture that Jesus says clearly not to stop the children from him. Tradition says that throughout history, there have been different stances on Baptism. So, I had to transition to my experience. It has always been my experience that Baptizing babies was a common practice, but the question from this person forced me to look a little deeper. I couldn't just rely on a differing tradition and on my own experience. I can see what scripture says but needed something more. John Wesley's understanding of Grace came into play. John Wesley understand grace in this way. Prevenient grace or the grace that comes before understanding, Justifying grace and Sanctifying grace.

It is with this explanation I use 'Losiki' or reason to come up with an understanding. In scripture Jeremiah 1:5 in NRSV reads: **"**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.**"** This shows

me that God knows us before we even know God. Infant baptism is an example of this prevenient grace. That God loves the baby even before the baby knows it. But it doesn't end there. That as we come to an understanding that God is offering us a relationship with his son Jesus Christ we can accept to enter that relationship by accepting Jesus as ones' Lord and Savior by acknowledging the belief in Jesus' death and resurrection on the cross. This is where the point of contention was for the person asking the question: That there is a point where we have a choice. John Wesley also says that the last part is Sanctifying grace, that we must consciously engage in striving to live a holy life, and although we are not perfect, but we strive towards it for that is what God calls us to do. As I explained this to the person, I could see that their attitude had changed and that following Christ was an invitation and not something to be forced.

One point of contention in the Tongan church is that the dominant culture promotes individualism. That promoting oneself is held in high regard. In the Tongan societal system, it is based in a hierarchy. I can see how this would not be a popular stance in today's society in America with the current political climate. However, part of the curriculum I would like to address the statement Jesus Christ is Lord. I believe that a culmination of the confirmation process is the profession of faith and that is professing that Jesus Christ is the confirmands Lord and Savior, so this is the way I interpret this statement from a cultural standpoint; this is an intentional submission to the rule and authority Jesus Christ has in one's life, not only this but one that enters into a mutual relationship with Christ. Now who benefits by us calling Jesus Lord? Would he be less if we didn't identify him as such? I think we benefit by calling Jesus Lord in this way; we as humans have an innate nature to name things. Karl Rahner in his book 'Foundations of Christian faith' proposes this idea of naming things. "Because they simply appear within the realm of our experience … press for a name" (Rahner 1982, 45). We do this to

identify and make sense of things that exist in our reality. By naming Jesus as Lord allows us to identify that which we consider governing our lives, but not only this there is an expectation that Jesus is in relationship with us. I draw this from my culture. In the Tongan culture we have Lords and nobles known as ~~Nopele~~ or Hou'eiki. In the Tongan context Lords are landowners and those who reside in that specific territory are in obligation to the Lord and the Lord is obligated to his people. This obligation is one that each provide for each other. The people who reside on the Land are afforded this privilege because the land belongs to the Lord and they are given the opportunity to a sustainable livelihood by cultivating and working the land, in return, the people provide for the Lord with their harvest and offer protection to the Lord if someone were to challenge his authority.

Part of the curriculum I would like to explain Christian living from a cultural perspective. "People join Christian communities as a way to experience shared worship, fellowship and mutual support" (Christian 2007, 67). This holds true for the Tongan society. There are four pillars or staples that undergird the Tongan society, it is often referred to as the "Faa'i Kavei Koula." Or "Four Golden pillars." The four pillars were taught to me by my Paternal aunt that I lived with in Tonga. This is the way that it was explained to me. The pillars are Faka'apa'apa / respect, Tauhi va / nurturing relationship, Mamahi'i me'a / Loyalty or passion and lastly Loto to / humility. These four pillars in my opinion also speak to our Christian lives. In 1 Peter 2:17a, "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God" (NIV). We find nurturing right relationships in John 13:34: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (NIV). In Deuteronomy 7:9: "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments" (NIV). And lastly, the

Bible says this about humility: “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way” (Psalm 25:9, NIV). This is an example of how Christianity has been intertwined with Tongan culture, that the values that uphold the Tongan society are based in scripture. It is important for the younger generations to know this, the rationale her is that there is a misconception that Tongans only found Jesus when they became Methodist here in the United States. This understanding or perception of the church by the younger generation weakens their understanding of the Tongan culture and that is why leaving the church comes easier to some is because the notion is that the church is offering a foreign religion and a foreign belief. I think that the more we can make connections or references to United Methodist Doctrine in a cultural light, I feel that the younger generations nurtured in confirmation classes will find their place and experience the Tongan culture as well.

I see this in our relationship with Jesus Christ. By acknowledging that Jesus Christ is Lord we enter a mutual obligation to care for each other. Jesus Christ cares for me and I care for Christ. By one acknowledging Christ as Lord identifies with Jesus Christ as ruler over one’s life.

The whole idea to offering United Methodist Doctrine from a cultural perspective is to reclaim what may have been colonized. There is something to be said on how colonization can affect theological perspectives, and what must we do to reclaim what has been lost through colonization.

Chapter 5

Decolonization and Reclamation

The whole idea driving my passion for this project will be addressed in this chapter. Dr. Kujawa-Holbrook suggested that I look at how colonization may affect or influence the Tongan religious experience. There is a saying in Tongan, "Ko e me'a 'ia e kau palangi." "That is for the white people." The problem is that this saying has become synonymous with ordering the church. If a Tongan church strives to start on time, the Tongans will take this as trying to be white and being late is simply referred to as Tongan time or Island Time. When churches organize into committees as spelled out by the United Methodist governing document, *The Book of Discipline*, the perception for the most part is that is a white thing. It seems that negative attributes are deemed as Tongan cultural traits and anything that suggests or promotes progress is a "white thing."

"*What if Jesus was not the colonizer, but among the colonized? What if Jesus Christ was a forced immigrant stowed away by Pākehā [Palangi / White] Missionaries?*" (Rountree 2022, 190-91). Te Aroha Rountree (2022, 190) suggests that theology has been a tool to promote exclusion and segregation:

> Theology in Aotearoa and Oceania has been made and remade by colonial institutions of school and thought since the arrival of ther Church Missionary Societies. Theology has been used to justify and perpetuate white oppression and dominance over *tangata whenua* [*Tangata Fonua* / Indigenous persons] since our first encounters. Pākehā—including missionaries – spread the good news, while stripping us of our language, culture, and land.

Rountree (2022, 190) proposes some unique questions: "*What if theology was not the dominant, but rather the dominated? What if theology was Once a Native wisdom? What if theology was*

forced into Eurocentrism, institutional racism, and academic biases?"

Thes questions and perspectives unfortunately I have experienced first-hand serving as a Tongan clergy in the United Methodist Church. A church that calls for unity, equity and inclusion but has yet to elect a Pacific Islander Bishop. All persons are represented except for the Pacific Islanders. It was explained to me that the UMC does not have the resources to address all the languages represented in the UMC as a whole. I understand this. However, the UMC sends resources to predominantly white churches to uphold the status quo, while the ethnic church gets by with less. I feel that it is time to reclaim who we are as Tongans. There has been a push for multiethnic churches, and what I have found this to be is struggling white churches extending their ministries to include ethnic persons but ultimately have a problem when the ethnic group wants to express their faith culturally. It seems to me that we are sacrificing the ethnic church experience in the name of multi-culturalism.

My hope is that I can develop a completed United Methodist Confirmation curriculum inspired and informed by Traditional Tongan culture and practices. Also to possibly offer this curriculum and include this data in the final project.

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